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Commentary

How China's State Actors Create a "Us vs US" World during Covid-19 Pandemic on Social Media

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Abstract

Health and science controversies surrounding Covid-19 pandemic have been politicized by state actors to manipulate international relations and politics. China is no exception. Using a package of communication tactics, the Chinese government has been engaging in an English-language information campaign to create an "Us vs US" world during the pandemic on social media. While the world is scrutinizing the accuracy of and the intention behind the information disseminated by China's state actors, this commentary urges scholars to also focus on the influence of such information on global audiences, as well as on global power dynamics.

Keywords

China; Coronavirus; Covid-19; ideological square; information campaign; mis/disinformation; national responsibility; soft power; "us" vs "them"

Issue

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1. Introduction

The world is struggling to uncover the harm caused by Covid-19 to human health and to propose scientific solutions to the virus itself and to the collateral damages of the pandemic. The uncertainties embedded in the crisis grant state actors spaces to restructure global power dynamics. One way to fracture and reshape the global power landscape is to initiate an information campaign on social media. This commentary focuses specifically on such information practices performed by the Chinese government. Political and public sectors in other countries are keen to check the accuracy of and the intention behind the information disseminated by China's state actors. As they investigate the nature of the information, scholars studying the intersections of international communication as public diplomacy to gain soft power should not neglect global audiences who have been and will continue to be exposed to the information circu-

lated on social media. Therefore, this commentary urges scholars to focus on the impact of China's governmental pandemic communication tactics on global audiences, as well as on global power dynamics.

2. With Crisis Comes Opportunity

The uncertainties of the pandemic crisis and the convenience of social media offer the Chinese government an opportunity to tell its own story of the pandemic. China has long been embracing the notion of soft power (Nye, 2011), aiming to have its political and socio-cultural values and behaviors acknowledged by other global community members. Driven by this mindset, the government has been leveraging English-language social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, although they are blocked in mainland China, to strategically brand itself to the outside world. Chinese missions, consulates, and diplomats have been coordinating with Chinese

state media, such as Xinhua News Agency, China Central Television, and *China Daily*, to disseminate strategically constructed messages on these platforms (Huang & Wang, 2019). These information measures aim to secure the discursive power (*huayuquan* in Chinese) of China in the world, which is one of the most important goals of China's soft power augmentation. These measures are obviously manifested during the pandemic. One of the main themes of the Chinese story of the pandemic is "Us vs US": "Us" refers to China and/or its allies who are opposed to "US" (United States). Although there are diverse debates about the health and science elements surrounding the pandemic, the mainstream response in the global range is to proactively deal with the pandemic from a humanitarian perspective. China's state actors attempt to use the spirits of solidarity and proactive actions to contrast with the politicization of the pandemic and the inadequate action in the US. China sees in this crisis an opportunity to challenge the US as the dominant global superpower through an information campaign.

3. Constructing "Us vs US" with Perplexing Communication Tactics

An information campaign usually involves a myriad of accurate and mis/disinformation (Jack, 2017). Misinformation refers to inaccurate information without an intention to mislead and disinformation is maliciously constructed information (Jack, 2017). A package of perplexing information tactics has been adopted by China's state actors in discursively constructing the "Us vs US" division during the pandemic. They tend to emphasize information that is positive about "Us" and negative about "US" and suppress information that is positive about "US" and negative about "Us," which forms an ideological square (van Dijk, 1998). The central topic of the "Us" and "US" disparity is the notion of national responsibility, which has connotations of (1) having a duty to deal with problems and (2) to be blamed for wrongdoings (Erskine, 2003; Loke, 2016). In mediated politics, the first connotation can be further differentiated by clarifying whether the duty is self-claimed, which positively depicts the one who shoulders the duty, or requested by others, which suppresses the positive meaning of the message (X. Zhao, 2019).

China's state actors have been constantly emphasizing China's proactive measures in taking on the duties to tackle this public health crisis. A pro-China tone, which has long been used in China's outward focused propaganda (Edney, 2012), is manifested through examples such as Pakistan's endorsement of China's measures (Figure 1). Examples like this positively frame China's responses to the pandemic. Moreover, it indicates that the two countries align themselves with each other, forming a sense of solidarity.

China's state actors not only used information with no factual inaccuracies but also blended in information which are difficult to define its nature (see Figure 2

for an example). The *Financial Times* (Johnson & Yang, 2020) documented attempts to clarify the accuracy of this tweet but reached no conclusion. Messages of this kind sowed confusion about the facts of China's massive medical aids to Italy and Italy's real responses to China's support.



Figure 1. Screenshot of @XHNews' tweet (captured on 10 April 2020, same with the following screenshots). Source: China Xinhua News (2020).



Figure 2. Screenshot of @SpokespersonCHN's tweet. Source: Hua (2020).

The construction of a positive "Us" is also based on rejecting the US's condemnation of China's faults. Interestingly, an example (Figure 3) showed that China's state actors teamed up with Hillary Clinton, the former US Secretary, to refute President Donald Trump's blaming of China as the origin of the virus. Opinions of this kind further perplexed readers about who they should believe in this public health crisis.



Figure 3. Screenshot of @Echinanews' tweet. Source: China News (2020).

In constructing a negative "US," China's state actors have also been applying a myriad of information strategies. Firstly, their social media accounts highlighted what is negative about the US, especially the US's irresponsible actions to tackle the pandemic. For example, Figure 4 shows that CGTN America indicated the hinderance caused by the US's trade restrictions on China's efforts in providing assistance overseas. What makes this tweet interesting is that CGTN America mixed US's irresponsibility during the pandemic with the prolonged trade war between China and the US, which cemented the accusation of the US in dealing with major global issues.



Figure 4. Screenshot of @cgtnamerica's Facebook post. Source: CGTN America (2020).

Moreover, the tit-for-tat narrative was further ignited when China's Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian urged people to read a poorly verified article which claims that Covid-19 originated in the US (Figure 5). While scientists are still on the way to figure out the origin of the virus, this tweet by one of China's most important state actors further muddled the water of the health and science controversies emerged from this pandemic.



Figure 5. Screenshot of @zlj517's tweet. Source: L. Zhao (2020).

Secondly, China's state actors requested the US to behave responsibly and benevolently (Figure 6). A combination of factual information in the original tweet by Jack Ma Foundation and the opinion by Chinese Embassy in South Africa solidified the image of an inactive "US."



Figure 6. Screenshot of @ChineseEmbSA's tweet. Source: Chinese Embassy in South Africa (2020).

Overall, using a package of information tactics and with the aid of English-language social media platforms, China's state actors have been fracturing international relations and politics and trying to reshape it from a "Us vs US" perspective through a confusing range of both factual and dubious information. Social media audiences' reactions to these information urge scholars to zoom in on new research agendas.

4. Symptoms of the “Infodemic”: New Research Agendas

While the world is investigating the nature of the information disseminated by China’s state actors on English-language social media during the pandemic (e.g., Insikt Group, 2020), scholars in media and communication studies should also focus on the audience reception of the information. Answering this question is crucial to understanding in a timely manner the implications of China’s pandemic information campaign on global publics’ perceptions of international relations and politics, and on the transformation of global power dynamics.

From a short-term perspective, scholars may want to start with the rich social media data composed of

comments, retweets, likes, and creative content such as memes and emojis. Factors including China’s state-backed internet commenters, state employees, and computational propaganda make this research agenda far more complicated than merely identifying the sentiment or themes of social media users’ reactions such as the positive comments on Sino–Italian solidarity (Figure 7), anti-US sentiment (Figure 8), and the China–US tit-for-tat arguments (Figure 9). Studies indicate the quick development of China’s computational propaganda alone. Not long ago, Bolsover and Howard (2019) found no evidence of pro-Chinese-state automation in Twitter posts. However, during the pandemic, an analysis shows the massive involvement of bots in tweets with pro-Chinese-state hashtags (Alkemy Lab, 2020). Scholars face the challenge of disentangling the distraction caused by the



Figure 7. Screenshot of @chinadaily’s Facebook post (left) and some of the responses (right). Source: China Daily (2020).



Figure 8. Screenshot of some of the responses to the post in Figure 4. Source: CGTN America (2020).



Figure 9. Screenshots of some of the responses to the posts in Figures 2 (left) and 5 (right). Sources: Hua (2020) and L. Zhao (2020).

mixed responses to social media users. Audiences' attention may be deflected from the real health and science problems in the pandemic, for which China shoulders global responsibilities, and the transforming international politics, on which China is exerting influence. Advanced computational approaches to social media interactions, as well as global public opinion polls, are helpful for clarifying global publics' perceptions of China and international relations and politics.

The implications of this ongoing information loop featured in true/dubious posts and manufactured responses should also be examined from a long-term perspective. China has been endeavoring to transform the US-dominated global power landscape along with its rising economy. Therefore, the fractured and confusing map of information caused by China's information campaign seems to be a result of a hard version of Nye's (2011) idea of soft power initiatives which value gaining foreign publics' trust in the practicing country. It is more important than ever to examine whether the communication tactics applied by China's state actors during the pandemic contribute to a transformation of the 'international alignment and balance of power' (Gerrits, 2018, p. 21) in the long run.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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